

TAKING OUT THE TRASH

Camp and the politics of parody

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Our understanding of Camp changes with the evolving history of gay subculture. The conditions and contexts for Camp differ in pre-Stonewall, post-Stonewall, post-AIDS, and contemporary Queer moments. To contribute to the current discussion, I want to explore three concepts – mass culture, subculture, and parody – through several perspectives. First, using a commercial boardroom and bedroom film, *The Betsy*, for elaboration, I discuss how a parodic stand to mass culture is present in a trend I call self-aware kitsch, and how it both draws on and potentiates Camp readings. Next, I consider Camp as a parodic strategy originating from gay subculture which provides an impetus for subtextual reading. Then, a further specification emerges from examining a variety of intentional Camp which celebrates casual excess through a deliberately crude and offensive content. Films such as *Trash*, *Multiple Maniacs*, and *Thundercrack* highlight the need for a political critique of Camp and a further analysis of parody as a strategy of subcultural resistance in contemporary media.

SELF-AWARE KITSCH

At its broadest, kitsch can be taken as the popular commercial art of the modern era. Certainly this is how Clement Greenberg presented it in his well-known essay, "Avant Garde and Kitsch" (10). For Greenberg, twentieth-century art is divided into two parts: the artistic avant-garde (which he favors) and kitsch, the mechanically reproduced "ersatz culture" which depends on formulaic patterns. In his words, it is the art of "vicarious experiences and fake sensations" (10). Other commentators have also used the term kitsch in an extremely judgmental way. Gillo Dorfles calls it "the world of bad taste" (9–12), and Abraham Moles defines it as "the art of happiness." Of course a term so

obviously subjective and class-biased (*whose* bad taste?) is virtually useless as a critical and analytical tool. But there is a sense in which kitsch can be used in a descriptive way, that is, when the text gives evidence that the makers themselves were aware of their "bad taste." Contemporary culture objects are often highly self-conscious of their own de-based status. I will call this self-aware kitsch.

Daniel Petrie's film *The Betsy* (1977), based on Harold Robbins's novel, is a fine example of kitsch that is totally aware of itself as kitsch. As a film version of what John Cawelti has labeled the "best-selling social melodrama" (260), the plot is familiar Robbins material – the scramble for power in the bedrooms and boardrooms of corporate America. This time we have an old patriarch of a Detroit auto dynasty who schemes to produce and dreams of a car as successful and practical as the Model T was for an earlier generation. It focuses on the success myth characteristic of work appealing to the broad mass audience, rather than the failure myth seen in work that is more appealing to the alienated petty bourgeoisie. That the film is totally self-aware can be demonstrated by mentioning that the auto tycoon is played with great gusto by Sir Laurence Olivier using a broad midwestern accent, and that we get to his ass, in long shot, as he vigorously makes love to a maid upstairs during his son's wedding celebration. This is casting against type of a rare order indeed. The lusty scene, in true melodramatic style, is secretly observed by the new daughter-in-law, underlining the film's particular method for constructing character. The characters do not *have* any psychological problems or interior life, the Oedipal situation is totally externalized; they do not *have* any fantasies, they live them. The result is a kind of behaviorist reading of the Tristan and Isolde myth – anticipation and reverie are truncated from passion, and guilt is subtracted from the love story.

A remarkable literalness infuses the entire film. At its best the directness has a comic-book simplicity as when Betsy, the granddaughter for whom the new car is to be named, goes for a naked swim. She is observed by the young hero, sees him watching, and acknowledges his glance with a smile. The neurotic voyeurism and cloying sentimentalism typical of such a shot sequence is avoided by her frankness. More typically, the film's visual style simply trades in well-worn clichés – such as lovemaking sequences that reproduce the lush cloying quality of *Penthouse* photography. Hollywood's old standby transition device, the rapid montage compressing events through time, is updated with split screen and multiple matted windows, well known to anyone who watches television commercials. This very familiarity is

reassuring. Petrie's use of the virtuoso long take with a moving camera is a far cry from its use by Renoir, Welles, Sirk, Jerry Lewis, Antonioni, or Godard. In Petrie's version, a seventy-second shot that takes the daughter-in-law from bedroom door to the patriarch's bed, the camera pans and dollies to create different compositions as the woman approaches the bed. This is a bland functionalism that ends in framing the pair in long shot from the foot of the bed. Then slowly dolly-ing and zooming in to frame the faces in a simple signification of the sexual act, it is followed by a straight cut to a long shot of the tycoon in a sunny dining room the next morning.

In a similar vein, literalness and functionalism combine in a recycled cliché when the patriarch's son, realizing that his wife is in bed with his father, commits suicide with a revolver while being watched by his own young son. We see the gun pointed at his head from the child's point of view, then a reverse shot close-up of the child's face and, as the gun goes off, a freeze frame of the child staring directly at the camera – recycling once again Truffaut's conclusion to *The 400 Blows* (1959). Of course the boy runs to find his mother and, of course, opens the door on his mother in his grandfather's arms. Could we ask for a more primal scene? Could we imagine that the film would be that obvious? But it is. Besides, the whole sequence takes place during a rainstorm – the pathetic fallacy in action. Clichés are not merely recycled in this genre, they are made more literal. For example, in *The Other Side of Midnight* (1977), faced with an unwanted pregnancy, the heroine performs a self-abortion using a wire coat hanger. Watching the film we are forced to ask ourselves, will they dare be that obvious? And of course they are, for the exaggeration, the heightening, the acceleration of clichés, underlines the situation, and the situation – the dramatic arrangement of characters and conflicts – forms the central fantasy attraction of melodrama.

For people with high-culture tastes or backgrounds, films such as *The Betsy* and *The Other Side of Midnight* can be received as total parodies. It is especially easy for media people (who can spot the formal clichés that underline the content conventions) to do so. But these films function in a different way with the general mass audience: spectators are engrossed by the situation and the exaggeration simultaneously. Fans have usually read the book and, if not, have heard the plot in advance from everyday conversations or the print and television journalism that surrounds contemporary film production, such as the *Entertainment Tonight* type of show. The experience of such self-aware kitsch demands a certain kind of willing suspension of disbelief. Identification

and enjoyment of the film's visual and narrative pleasures are present, to be sure, but taken in a somewhat distanced direction. Rather than "talking down" to the audience, the makers of self-aware kitsch are "talking across" to that audience. The implicit assumption is: We all know this is fun, just a good piece of entertainment.

In a study of *Dynasty* with attention to audience responses, particularly group spectatorship in bars and clubs that made viewing a distinct event highlighted by active parodic reading, Jane Feuer linked this dual sensibility to gay consciousness:

the camp decoding is also a preferred reading of the text. According to one critic, "*Dynasty* represents something extraordinary: the incursion of so-called gay taste into the mainstream of American culture." Camp is not a property of a text, but exists in the nature of the activations; however, not just any text can be camped, and *Dynasty* certainly facilitates the process. . . . Very early on its producers were aware of camp decodings and intended to encode them in the text by devising "outrageous plots" and "walk(ing) a fine line, just this side of camp. . . . It is important to stress that the camp attitude toward *Dynasty* in both gay and mainstream culture does not preclude emotional identification; rather, it embraces both identification and parody – attitudes normally viewed as mutually exclusive – at the same time and as part of the same sensibility. As Richard Dyer has written, the gay sensibility "holds together qualities that are elsewhere felt as antithetical: theatricality and authenticity . . . intensity and irony, a fierce assertion of extreme feeling with a deprecating sense of its absurdity."

(447–448)

The characteristic parody of self-aware kitsch promotes what John Fiske has called "skeptical hedonism" in audience response to much mass-culture documentary, that is, we all know this is a fantasy, but we want in on the fun of such phenomena, for example, as television wrestling or supermarket tabloid headlines. In this duality of response, self-aware kitsch is related to, or overlaps with, Camp.

CAMP READINGS

Following Susan Sontag's provocative and original essay, "Notes on Camp," we can recognize Camp as a strategy of reading that sees the world in terms of aestheticization and style: "the essence of Camp is its

love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration" (105). Camp is an ironic and parodic appreciation of an extravagant form that is out of proportion to its content, especially when that content is banal or trivial. Sontag identifies pure camp as naive and unintentional, exhibiting a failed seriousness and/or passionate ambition.

A good example of failed seriousness would be the mid-1950s independently produced film about transvestism, *Glen or Glenda*, which found some success when rereleased on the midnight show and college film circuit where it is appreciated for its amazingly defensive fetishism. The defense of fantasy is so strong (a voice-over narration interprets everything we are seeing), and so mundane (the rhetoric of democratic choice and privacy of the home is constantly invoked in the style of instructional films), and so particular (we are continually reminded that male cross-dressing has absolutely nothing to do with homosexuality), that it invites the same kind of hilarity as *Reefer Madness*, the earnest anti-marijuana film of the 1930s that was recirculated to stoned audiences in the 1960s. Such work, if not actually Camp, certainly facilitates a Camp reading because it invites scornful laughter due to its ineptness.

Hollywood film often exhibits a psycho-aesthetic pluralism. Films are deliberately constructed to be open to a great deal of very different fantasizing. That is one secret of their mass appeal. What facilitates a Camp reading in this context is that possibilities for fantasizing have been so simplified that they seem isolated and ridiculous. We need our defenses. Sontag underlined the problem with this as a deliberate strategy in discussing

the delicate relation between parody and self-parody in Camp. The films of Hitchcock are a showcase for this problem. When self-parody lacks ebullience but instead reveals (even sporadically) a contempt for one's themes and one's materials – as in *To Catch a Thief*, *Rear Window*, *North By Northwest* – the results are forced and heavy-handed, rarely Camp. Successful Camp . . . even when it reveals self-parody, reeks of self-love.

(111)

Sontag, writing in 1964, minimized the links between Camp and male homosexual culture. Writing to correct Sontag, Richard Dyer and Jack Babuscio have claimed Camp as a core element of gay male subculture. As Dyer argues:

It is just about the only style, language and culture that is

distinctively and unambiguously gay male. In a world drenched in straightness all the images and the words of society express and confirm the rightness of heterosexuality. Camp is the one thing that expresses and confirms being a gay man.

(11)

Babuscio elaborates the relationship in his key essay in the developing field of gay film criticism, "Camp and the Gay Sensibility." Arguing in more narrow terms than Sontag, he discusses Camp as expressing a relationship between something and the observer's gayness. Camp constitutes a different consciousness, "a heightened awareness of certain human complications of feeling that spring from the fact of social oppression" (40). Babuscio elaborates in terms of four basic features of Camp: irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humor. Camp irony is "any highly incongruous contrast between an individual or thing and its context or association. The most common of incongruous elements is that of masculine/feminine" (41). Aestheticism as part of Camp emerges in a practical appreciation of "style as a means of self-projection, a conveyor of meaning and an expression of emotional tone" (43). Similarly, to take life as theatre, particularly in terms of sex role playing, is fundamental to both Camp and gay consciousness. Camp humor is a strategy for reconciling conflicting emotions: it is "a means of dealing with a hostile environment and, in the process, of defining a positive identity" (47). Significantly, Babuscio argues that Camp humor relies on an involvement, strongly identifying with a situation or object while comically appreciating its contradictions. In this it is different from the detachment that facilitates mockery.

Dyer and Babuscio are right in specifying Camp as a distinct part of gay male culture but, in making that case, they do not sufficiently grant the broadening of concepts of Camp based on the appropriations that took place due to the publication of Sontag's 1964 essay. "Notes on Camp" draws many connections between Camp and the art world. Since that time, the media world (television, radio, music, advertising, journalism, etc.) has tended to use and even co-opt Camp, perhaps neutralizing (by naturalizing) its subversive potential.

There is a tendency for mass-culture media to take up almost anything that is different and turn it into an aspect of fashionable change: something different to spice up jaded tastes. The media world's cannibalization of subcultures is a structural feature of the culture industry. It is staffed by people who are predominantly petty bourgeois professionals whose very occupation implies a distance from and an

irony toward the personalities, programs, and products they produce – a true dissociation of sensibility. Unable to believe in what they make, to have a naive acceptance of it, mass-culture makers are often drawn to subcultures precisely for their difference, their newness, their not-as-yet-commercialized qualities. All of which, not so incidentally, can be turned back into one's work; a weekend in the subculture inspires Monday morning's new ad campaign.

If Camp is part of gay male subculture, it is certainly appropriated for nongay usage as evidenced by many of Ken Russell's films. In their extravagant theatricality, love of artifice, and extreme emotional range, they can be considered examples of what I call "Het Camp," or what Moe Meyer calls the "camp trace." Broadening a concept of Camp to encompass both kinds of phenomena – Camp originating in the gay subculture as well as its nongay appropriation – brings me back to kitsch.

CAMP WRITINGS

Camp films and videos depend on the kitsch aspect of mass culture. Originally, mass culture based itself on existing traditional culture, turning it into a system, that is, into a form able to be reproduced industrially. Today U.S. commercial culture recirculates itself. The existing culture it parodies and systematizes not only includes, but is often dominated by, previous mass culture. Current popular culture is, at its core, obsessively self-reflexive – take, for example, IBM ads that recirculate Charlie Chaplin's image or MTV's relentless recirculation of images and style figures from earlier eras.

Camp is a strategy for makers as well as for reception. It draws on and transforms mass culture. In this it critiques the dominant culture, but in the dominant culture's own terms; it seldom rests on any coherent or sustained analysis of society or history. Camp always uses parody but, more importantly, it embodies parody as a general mode of discourse. As a mode of discourse, parody typically operates within the dominant ideology, but with an internal tension. Since Camp is an especially acute ideological form containing active contradictions it can, in certain social and historical contexts, challenge dominant culture.

To some extent, Camp originates in a gay male perception that gender is, if not quite arbitrary, certainly not biologically determined or natural, but rather that gender is socially constructed, artificial, and performed (and thus open to being consciously deformed). In terms of

drag, a form of gender parody, high Camp aims for the seamless illusion of female impersonation, while low Camp accepts the deconstructed gender presence of drag queens. In a closely related way, what I call trash – or deliberate low Camp – originates in the perception by some gay men and others that taste, or aesthetic sensibility, is also socially constructed. In defiance of Kantian aesthetics and high-culture prejudices, a trash imagination understands that aesthetic pleasure can be found in diverse ways, including the marginalized and excluded. When employed intentionally as a strategy for production, Camp – whether its source is gay subculture or nongay appropriation – relies for its effect on casual excess, deviant decorum, and libidinal obviousness. Camp pushes a poorly done form (poorly done by conventional standards of technique and social manners) to the limits so that its very badness is what the work is about. A classic trash moment in film appears in John Waters's *Pink Flamingoes* (1970) when the drag-queen heroine, Divine, eats dog excrement. In other words, low Camp deliberately celebrates bad taste and often intentionally offends aesthetic and social sensibilities in order to make a statement.

Minimally, Camp films embody the ethos of shocking mainstream middle-class values. Flagrant transvestites will never fit middle America's self-image. Thus by their very presence Holly Woodlawn in *Trash* (dir. Paul Morrissey 1970) and Divine in *Multiple Maniacs* (dir. John Waters 1970) offend by being consistently Camp. They have the affrontery to define their own presentations: the actor as actress, not as woman. Inevitably, the audience is drawn to accept Holly Woodlawn as something more than an extended joke on gender possibilities, and to think of her seriously – not as woman, but as queen.¹ The film is subversive, not because of the initial gender confusion but because the audience is eventually lured into liking Woodlawn. She is herself always, and without excuse, a twenty-four-hour-a-day actress. The style becomes the content.

Push the point further and you have the early Divine: gross in body, gross in deed. Divine's style enters the realm where quantitative change becomes qualitative change and suddenly bad taste is celebrated as good taste. Holly and Divine interrupt and displace the usual position of the actress. Consider Rouben Mamoulian's remarks on the conclusion of *Queen Christina*:

Garbo asked me: "What do I play in this scene?" Remember she is standing there for 150 feet of the film – 90 feet of them in close-up. I said: "Have you heard of *tabula rasa*? I want your face to be a

blank sheet of paper. I want the writing to be done by every member of the audience. I'd like it if you could avoid even blinking your eyes, so that you're nothing but a beautiful mask." So in fact there is *nothing* on her face: but everyone who has seen the film will tell you what she is thinking and feeling. And always it is something different.

(qtd in Milne 74-75)

Classic and contemporary Hollywood cinema uses a broad style of manipulated realism to position the actress in the narrative and in the frame as a partial metaphor, as a figure to be completed, as a Rorschach card, as an object of sexual gaze. Using a different style, one we might call sordid naturalism pushed to wittiness, *Trash* uses Joe Dallesandro in that position. Passive in the face of everything and everyone, junkie Joe offers his hustler's body to anyone and any use as long as he can shoot up. He has a blank face set against the human Muzak of such events as getting a blow job, listening to an endless monologue, or being stuck with a quarreling couple. Whatever others want him to be, he becomes. Joe is the ultimate human mask.

Although positioned in the narrative and frame as woman, he does not satisfy because he is also positioned as junkie. Just as the story line promises fulfillment, the film reverses the interplay of visual and verbal constructions. We wait out the real time of Joe's shooting up only to have the camera drift away, denying us Joe's communion with heroin by substituting the everyday and trivial. While Joe takes a dissociation of sensibility in his arm, we take it in our eyes and ears.

Arguing that the hustler and the transvestite are "linked for all their apparent difference by a common obsession with the mystery of how a man inhabits his flesh," Stephen Koch, in his book on Andy Warhol's films, finds "They are at opposite poles of a common dilemma. The transvestite, on the one hand, builds upon the denial of his anatomical reality; the hustler, on the other, proclaims himself to be 'just a body'" (122). But this observation seems to say the least important thing about Holly Woodlawn in *Trash*. Gender identity and sexuality are the least of her problems as she tries to establish a household. Much more to the point is that Holly, as a lower East Side street person, is a survivor. This garbage picker has simple and just aspirations. She only wants to make a nice home, raise a child, and attain the security of being on welfare. In the second half, as her sleazy subculture soap opera unfolds, the film invites us to approve of her self-conscious struggle for a better life. And because her cause is just, our own emotions (well-trained by

old melodramas) override the simple desire for the comic when Holly faces a welfare office toad. It is funny and clever to see Holly putting on a bureaucrat, but we become annoyed when he tries to blackmail her, and we cheer when she insists on her rights and self-respect. In *Trash*, Joe is initially situated as woman and then repositioned as junkie – we can have his body, but not his mind. At first Holly is situated in the film as sacrificing woman, but then repositioned as a politically exemplary welfare mother fighting back as best she can.

In *Multiple Maniacs*, Divine fights back also, but that campaign, initiated by her assault on middle America, accumulates its momentum in a different direction – toward excess for its own sake, toward Grand Guignol, toward the grotesque. But Divine never really arrives anywhere and ends up subverting her own Camp critique. Rather than encountering the ironic interplay of style against substance that is characteristic of Camp, Divine simply assaults all audience sensibilities from a unique and inexplicable position. Shock substitutes for clever form; excess becomes its own excuse; and Divine's four-hundred-pound excess is simply bizarre, representing nothing but itself, a non sequitur raised to an initial proposition. As a result, the deliberate crudeness of Divine's behavior inhibits appreciation in the audience's response. Divine is at her best when she goes berserk after a mass murder, cannibalistic orgy, and rape by a giant lobster. But actually this story line has little to do with Divine's persona or her acting. The film never achieves the potential of Camp to transcend its own offensiveness because *Multiple Maniacs* stalls out again and again. At times Divine is disgusting only because she is dull and repetitive, not because she has genuinely assaulted anyone's sensibilities.

Multiple Maniacs underlines a problem for low Camp as an aesthetic strategy. Without narrative development, rhythmic pacing, character interest, variation, or surprise, it is difficult to sustain audience attention for the length of the film. This remains a problem in all John Waters's early work. However, by the time he gets to work with a sufficient budget for high production values – with *Polyester* and *Hairspray* in the 1980s – he decisively overcomes those problems. And not so ironically, his ongoing national reputation in film circles, coupled with a successful public persona, allowed him to become an artistic favorite son in his hometown of Baltimore. As a performer, Divine also grew artistically, and became a much stronger comic actress as well as club performer. So celebrity overcame notoriety, and financial success finally validated the early work that was explicitly intended to shock and outrage.

While Waters's earlier films are *sui generis*, some of his contemporaries such as George Kuchar and Curt McDowell have produced significant genre parodies using Camp as a strategy. Kuchar's *The Devil's Cleavage* (1975) imitates the ripest form of Hollywood domestic melodrama of the 1940s and 1950s: films that somehow made you terribly conscious of the shape of Robert Stack's mouth or Rock Hudson's jaw; films that featured actresses cast to type – Ava Gardner, Dorothy Malone, Susan Hayward, Joan Crawford, Barbara Stanwyck, Lana Turner, and Lauren Bacall.

Kuchar's lovingly farcical re-creation of those melodramas is camp parody that sometimes steals directly from the genre, sometimes burlesques it, and often travesties it. As you might expect, it soon begins to mock all kinds of cinematic references from Hitchcock to Preminger. From the opening titles with their swiggling stars and booming Hollywood orchestra, to a wonderfully inconclusive and arbitrary ending, Kuchar manages terribly well in terms of imagination and inventiveness, and just plain terribly in terms of such humdrum details of filming as using a light meter and tape recorder. Technical ineptness aside, we end up with a marvelous hybrid, as if Fuller and von Sternberg had collaborated in shooting a script by Tennessee Williams and Russ Meyer. Perhaps excess is the most basic element of Kuchar's method, even when it is an excess of cliché. Kuchar piles it on: tacky apartments are filled with sleazy characters whose conversations become confessions that, once begun, continue and continue and continue.

The result is a kind of humor often dismissed as adolescent. And it is. But it is also a joke that calls scatology what it is – shit. That is the problem. To get at the truth you have to put up with the idiosyncrasies. It is excessive. It does not always work. But when it does, it says what no one else is saying. This may help explain why George Kuchar and his twin brother Mike, who have been making films since adolescence thirty-five years ago, remain left out of most discussions of the film avant-garde. They can hardly be squeezed into formalist critiques, not with lines like, "I've read too many Arlene Dahl beauty books and Polly Bergen Oil of Turtle ads to back out now."²

Actually, if we want a good starting analysis of *The Devil's Cleavage*, we can look at those critics who held up for acclaim that string of 1950s weepy films by Douglas Sirk that Kuchar is parodying: *Magnificent Obsession*, *All That Heaven Allows*, *Written on the Wind*, *Tamished Angels*, and *Imitation of Life*. Andrew Sarris says of his work that

The essence of Sirkian cinema is the direct confrontation of all material, however fanciful and improbable. Even in his most dubious projects, Sirk never shrinks away from the ridiculous, but by a full-bodied formal development, his art transcends the ridiculous, as form comments on content.

(109–110)

While Paul Willemen explains that "by altering the rhetoric of bourgeois melodrama, through stylization and parody, Sirk's films distance themselves from the bourgeois ideology" (67).

Substitute "Kuchar" for "Sirk" in the above quotes and you have a more than plausible analysis. The scene of a woman raping a man: isn't it ("however fanciful or improbable") an example of art transcending the merely "ridiculous, as form comments on content"? And does this rate as "altering the rhetoric of bourgeois melodrama": "Do you expect me to commit adultery for the sixth time this week?"³ This is not to say that Sirk enthusiasts cannot articulate what they mean, but rather to point out that if you look at something long enough, it begins to gain qualities it never had. This is especially true with Sirk, even Kuchar. Sirk tells us, "Cinema is blood, is tears, violence, hate, death, and love" (qtd in Fassbinder 95). But the style of his melodrama is dead, and that is what Kuchar burlesques. Kuchar reminds us that cinema, like life, is also bed pans, ear wax, sleazy fantasy, ineptitude, compromise, and laughter.

Thundercrack (dir. Curt McDowell 1975) is a hard-core porn film with scenes of explicit sexual activity. It uses a trash style that undercuts most people's usual responses to porn. For example, it depicts a scene of male masturbation by machine, calculated to turn off many porn viewers. It presents a blow job in an intentionally anticlimactic way by punctuating it with a singularly banal discussion. McDowell and his script writer George Kuchar are the perfect collaborative partnership for this camp of cinematic conventions. With a stock-in-trade vulgarity of gargantuan proportions, they push their excesses to an epic length of two and a half hours. While the basic story line seems simple enough – the old reliable that brings together a group of strangers who must relate to each other and some outside danger – the film's main interest lies in depicting the constantly changing parodies of cultural conventions from the cinematic and real worlds. Thus the actor's stock piece, a narrative recital of a gruesome incident, becomes in *Thundercrack* a bizarre story about how a woman ignited her girdle at a garden party to demonstrate her freedom, only to be burned by her garment's

lethal chemistry. The guests accidentally join in her immolation when the alcohol in their drinks feeds the fire instead of putting it out. The victim becomes a martyr for the women's movement and the inspiration for a terrorist attack on the girdle company that had exhibited such a typical capitalist disregard for human life by making the incendiary underwear.

The film continues in this vein, mixing shaggy dog stories, Grand Guignol, clichés of cheap magazine fiction, non sequiturs, parodies of reborn Christians, moments of soap-opera drama, and hard-core pornography. *Thundercrack* has just enough parody to construct a plausible case for redeeming social value. But any sustained attempt to justify the film on such grounds would run into the problem of the film's relentless absurdity. Can we take anything in it seriously?

I think the film does provide one anchoring reference point in the last sexual escapade. Justifying a submission to sexual blackmail, one character explains, "No greater love can a man show for a woman than to give his body to the enemy." This is a verbal defense of the one sex scene that is presented straight (well, it is a gay love scene, but without mockery). The intercourse between two men is filmed and presented as ordinary porn with an emotionally synchronized soundtrack and routine climax. This scene, as opposed to all the other sexual encounters, is privileged: it intends to be erotic.

In this way the film actually does get beyond the running gags on impotence, masturbation, voyeurism, enemas, incest, and bestiality. The women in the film are not women, but drag queens who happen to have the biological definition of female. In one sense, then, the film is an extended gay parody of heterosexuality: physically, as when one man has intercourse with an inflatable female doll; and verbally, as when both male and female characters abuse men who become impotent when faced with an invitation to heterosexual pleasure. In this sense, the whole film stands as a double entendre, one that can be fully understood only within the context of a gay male subculture.

POLITICS OF PARODY

Susan Sontag, writing in 1964, saw camp, with its rejection of morality, as "disengaged, depoliticized – or at least apolitical" (107). She argues this because "Homosexuals have pinned their integration into society on promoting the aesthetic sense. Camp is a solvent of morality. It neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness" (118). In response

to Sontag, and writing within the framework of the contemporary gay movement, Jack Babuscio comments:

Consistently followed as a comprehensive attitude, aestheticism inevitably leads to an ingrown selfishness in life, and to triviality in art. As a means to personal liberation through the exploration of experience, camp is an assertion of one's self-integrity – a temporary means of accommodation with society in which art becomes, at one and the same time, an intense mode of individualism and a form of spirited protest. And while camp advocates the dissolution of hard and inflexible moral rules, it pleads, too, for a morality of sympathy.

(42)

But he does argue that "camp can be subversive – a means of illustrating those cultural ambiguities and contradictions that oppress us all, gay and straight, and in particular women" (48). Richard Dyer has elaborated this point:

Not all gay camp is in fact progressive, but nonetheless it does have the potential for being so. What camp can do is demystify the images and world view of art and the media. . . . Camp, by drawing attention to the artifices employed by artists, can constantly remind us that what we are seeing is only a view of life. This doesn't stop us enjoying it, but it does stop us believing too readily everything we are shown.

(13)

Camp, like any particular subcultural attitude in our society, operates within the larger boundaries of a racist, patriarchal, bourgeois culture. That it defines itself in difference from the dominant culture does not automatically construct Camp as radically oppositional. Only an audience and the work's exhibition context can complete that subversion. At some moments oppositionality appears more obvious than at others. For example, Waters and Divine can be rapidly recuperated into the existing system of sexist oppression. In fact, Divine's solo club act often included heavy doses of anti-woman humor.

In this perspective, *Thundercrack* came into existence in 1975 at a peculiar historical juncture. It exhibited a full flowering of the filmic Camp established in the early 1960s with Jack Smith's famous underground film *Flaming Creatures*, a polymorphous and perverse sexual romp that became a celebrated cause in breaking down reactionary censorship. At the same time, *Thundercrack* is a testament to the limited

version of male consciousness without the addition of a feminist understanding of society. McDowell and Kuchar, like Waters, offer a sharp critique of dominant features of American life, but often lack a fuller view of human existence. Yet, sometimes, the subversive potential of Camp can emerge simultaneously as both ironic and sincere.

In *Trash*, Holly Woodlawn takes a class stand. Her insistence that she will keep her silver shoes and still demand the state help support her child is marvelously ironic. Similarly, in some of his shorter works, George Kuchar shows an ability to combine camp parody with sincerity as in *I, an Actress*. We find the offscreen director, after coaching an unprepared woman for a role in what must be a Kuchar camp melodrama, take center screen to show "how it should be done," in a scene of self-aware silliness as Kuchar gets passionately caught up in the role, revealing his own partisan love for the part. In *Mongrelloid*, a parody of the home movie and avant-garde portrait film, Kuchar pushes the two genres' dominant code of sincerity to the point of the absurd as he portrays his dog Bockö as well as his own willingness to be foolish on screen. Giving Bockö the dog's favorite toys, Kuchar becomes the all-American father to a disinterested dog: "I buy these things for you to make you happy!" Over the grainy 8mm home movie footage he asks his pet, "We stopped in Salt Lake City. Do you remember? You made caca in Salt Lake City." Camp in its expression of social and aesthetic offensiveness can, with a prepared audience, attain a certain transcendence, providing a significant comment on art and society through a combination of parody and sincerity.

Parody can be thought of as a specific technique and also as a mode of discourse. As a technique, parody involves the articulation of a critique by expressing a meaning different to the stated or ostensible meaning through a repetition or doubling. Linda Hutcheon has elaborated, in great detail, a theory of parody in modern culture, one which – in the case of art – is often linked to self-referentiality in the text, described by Linda Hutcheon as "repetition with critical difference" (7).

Radical criticism has taken three different positions with regard to the politics of parody: as inherently apolitical, as inherently critical, and as simply a condition of contemporary art and cultural production. Those who argue that parody is inherently apolitical and regressive usually do so on an openly political basis. In its most general form, the radical argument goes: parody separates form from content, then validates that separation (a violation of organic unity), and then

validates form as more important than content (formalism). It is then a species of aestheticism (or art for art's sake), of the divorce of human values from the art experience and considering art as only a matter of internal form separated from ordinary life, from the spectator. It is tied to creating a subject-text relationship that is essentially a training program for alienation.

The contrary argument, that parody is inherently progressive, rests on the assumption that parody creates an "open form" that allows for a complex experience. The text then becomes open (or free), producing a liberating effect on the audience (though we might remember that freedom can only be taken, not given). Correlative with this is a celebration of the freedom of detachment, of an indeterminate floating that was described by Roland Barthes. This celebration of indecision, of not taking sides, reflects the class position of the petty bourgeoisie. The genius of the petty bourgeoisie after all, its survival, is in working with both major classes; it floats so that it does not have to appear to be taking sides (yet to remain uncommitted during a power struggle is in reality to side with the more powerful).

Barthes, in his essays on writers, teachers, and intellectuals, urges ambiguity and floating (he makes the explicit comparison of being stoned on marijuana) as a way of foreclosing a rapid reductionism (331). This same call, which in Barthes's work seems like an attempt to interrupt the all too certain and all too rational project of traditional French intellectual life, becomes in later thinkers of 1970s France simply an excuse for maintaining privilege by refusing any totalizing thought, scorning any commitment as imperfect, and achieving an arrogant level of intellectual self-pity.⁴

We must also account for the basic feature of contemporary arts that the audience does understand parody and always has the capacity, on its own, to adopt a parodic reading of the work. At the same time, this knowledge differs in its actual social use. Audience members can use parody defensively to defuse, diffuse, and break down the assault on them (most easily done with a simple separation, which is why the formulaic quality of much mass culture lends itself so well to this kind of parodic project). On the other hand, there are those who use parody as a means of control and domination. Some maintain their political, economic, and social positions by creating and sustaining parody in the discourses of journalism, advertising, propaganda, and political rhetoric. Barthes is right to argue against authority and for complexity. But in arguing for parody and indeterminacy he finally argues against practice, commitment, risk, or even testing the idea. We cannot say

that freedom is not having to decide. In fact, in the practice of everyday life, history forces decisions on us. The question of freedom is political and existential: what decision do you make, what side are you on?

A third radical position is that parody is an inherent aspect of contemporary art. Both high-culture and mass-culture forms today are heavily parodic. Art is never univocal; it always gets different responses from different people. Take the example of the cakewalk, a processional dance originating in the antebellum plantation American south. Originally the cakewalk was a show arranged for the entertainment of the white masters. The black slaves were given cast-off clothing, finery unsuitable for their ordinary labor, and thus dressed up proceeded to parade (often with a cake as the prize, hence the name of the dance). For the masters there was considerable amusement in seeing slaves in this totally "inappropriate" clothing employing extreme gestures and performing as if they had the refined manners of aristocrats. Yet for the slaves who participated, and hateful as this scorn might have been, it was also an opportunity to mock the masters' manners. After the Civil War, the cakewalk – synchronized with African rhythms – continued in various forms (including the minstrel show). From the visual evidence we have forty years later, preserved in the first silent films, we can see how blacks parodied the whites' fancy manners in a comic form that safely contained, but certainly did not eliminate, social criticism. On one level the stage representation contributed to the racist myth of the happy plantation and, on the other, it revealed the persistence of a critique within popular forms. Whites remained amused and superior, but blacks could read the subversive ridicule involved. Everyone laughed, but one side laughed differently from the other. This example should remind us that parody does not reside in the work alone, but rather derives from a stance people take toward it. All works can be read potentially as parody, though clearly some works invite a parodic reading more than others.

Parody is persistent under conditions of advanced capitalism. Parody stands as a means of accommodation to things that people think they cannot change. In that sense it is adaptive. But once people sense that history is changing and that they can change things around them, they use parody differently. It becomes deep and cutting against the past, against the status quo, against what holds people back. It is fused with anger in art and political expression. Yet in terms of everyday-life praxis, it also softens and becomes much diffused. Parody begins to function in art to indicate richness, diversity, possibility, and hope for

the future precisely because it seems a whole culture can be transformed. Parody sets us the opportunity to make new connections. At its best this is how the 1960s counterculture was able to use parody. It is what is marked in Jimi Hendrix's performance of "The Star-Spangled Banner." That version of the national anthem took something totally identified with the dominant culture and magically transformed it into something that said to youth culture, "we have a right to this, too . . . we can take it over and transform it to our own ends using our own unique tools and talents." This kind of parody reveals a greater sense of the range of life and its possibilities, an awareness of the grotesque, of carnival, and of anger, sensuality, and sexuality.

Camp, as parody, has an ability to expose what the powers-that-be would like to keep neatly hidden and out of sight. Instead of acquiescing in the ideology of a disposable culture that wants to flush away its social problems, Camp can insist on a determined recycling of political agendas as well as aesthetic diversity. While the assimilationist sector of gay politics pursued a strategy of declaring "we're just like everyone else," the more radical wing – represented by *Fag Rag* in the 1970s and Queer Nation in the 1990s – often relies on Camp in its cultural production. Scott Heron's post-punk transgression, *Laff at the Fags* (1986), outrageously confirms for comic effect every prejudiced stereotype about gay men being obsessed with perverse sex. Frequently in recent years, Camp appears in conjunction with other forms serving a more explicit political agenda, as in Todd Haynes's *Poison* (1990) with one section allegorically interpreting AIDS panic through a combination of film-noir style and horror-film imagery. German political film and video maker Rosa Von Prauhheim's work throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s uses and reuses Camp as a radical expressive strategy. Similarly, Canadian video artist John Greyson takes up the subject of gay men's washroom sex in *You Taste American* (1986) (with Michel Foucault and Tennessee Williams arrested by repressive police) and *Urinal* (1988) using Camp as a critical strategy. The videos indict police surveillance and harassment of gay sexuality, but also critique the gay movement's common embarrassment at this homosex often practiced by men who do not identify with the gay community. There is a minor, but vital, tradition of radical media that takes up mass culture at its worst – not to imitate the dominant in order to attract a large audience but to work with and against its possibilities while transforming it in the process. We need richness, fullness, a sense of life's possibilities, a sense that includes the truth of Camp, if we are to create a truly popular radical culture.

NOTES

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- 1 That is, if one is aesthetically receptive to the work to begin with. Which is to say that the particular and peculiar context of reception is absolutely crucial to understanding and appreciating Camp, which presents itself initially as a marginal, outré, and deviant experience, which itself is part of its attraction for its actual audience.
- 2 Kuchar, George (dir.). 1975. *The Devil's Cleavage*.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Let's name names: at the best end, Michel Foucault; at the worst: Philippe Sollers and Julia Kristeva; with Jean Baudrillard playing the Nutty Professor who bounces back and forth between these extremes.

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